

A Sensible Approach to Toilet Training

Toilet training is a complex skill in which the child must

- Recognize the need to toilet
- Control the bowels and bladder
- Communicate her needs to her caregiver
- Be able to dress and undress

Like any skill, toileting requires a patient instructor. When the timing is right, allow your child to select underwear and inform him that today he gets to wear big boy underwear and it is his job to keep them clean and dry. Inevitably, he will have an accident. He needs to feel a little uncomfortable so he makes the connection. When you note this, say in a matter of fact tone of voice, "Oh my, you had an accident. You need to clean yourself up. Let me help you." Take him to the bathroom and make it clear that while you will help, the clean up is his job. When he is dressed again say, "Wow, that took a long time. Next time if you use the toilet you are going to have a lot more time to play." Avoid frequent reminders as the child will perceive this as you are trying to control the toileting. We all know how much toddlers like to control things!

The key features here are:

- The child is now responsible for the toileting
- The child is involved in the clean up
- The child perceives that it is in his/her best interest to use the toilet (I am a big boy/girl and I have more playtime if I use the toilet)

Failures occur when

- The parent tries to be in control of the toileting
- The parent gets upset by the accidents. Toddlers often find this very reinforcing (Wow, I can make steam come out of Mom's ears!)
- Using a diaper or pull up intermittently. This is confusing as the child forgets when she can use the diaper and when she has to control her bowels and bladder. The exception is that it is fine to use the diaper or pull up at night and nap time.
 - The timing is not right. This should not be difficult. If you are still seeing lots of accidents on day 3, forget it for a while. Leave the underpants out and periodically mention them to your child. If she doesn't seem interested in a few weeks, try the process again.

Readiness Signs

Child

- Age 2 to 3
- Language skills to communicate toileting needs
- Motor skills to dress and undress

Parent

- Willingness to tolerate a little messiness
- Patience to teach a new skill
- Commitment to stay close to home for a few days
- Judges that the child is ready

I have heard you can train an infant. Is this true?

In many cultures, babies are toilet trained at 6 to 9 months. The caregiver becomes attuned to subtle changes in the child's behavior associated with the need to urinate or defecate. The child is then placed on the toilet. In this case, the caregiver is trained, not the infant. Some parents in our culture can be successful with this approach. It requires a family that stays close to home and is willing to tolerate some mess, as it is not foolproof. One caveat for families that try this approach: at 2 to 2 1/2 it is important to institute the child training method, so the child becomes responsible for his toileting.

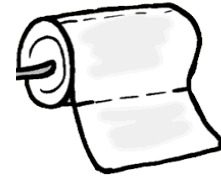
Take advantage of a child's natural curiosity at about 18 months. Talk about the process, become familiar with the potty chair or toilet, work on language and dressing skills.

Timing of toilet training:

- Warm weather months (you have less clothes to deal with)
- Before or after a new sibling arrives. Regression tends to happen when toileting is a recently acquired skill. If you wait until after, it is best to wait until the new baby is on a fairly predictable schedule and you are not overwhelmed and exhausted.



FAQs



Potty Chair or Toilet?

You can use either one. The potty chair is less intimidating for many toddlers, so may be better accepted. It is easier to train right on the toilet (one less step), but only if your child is not fearful. So, involve your child in the choice.

For boys, standing or sitting?

It is often easier to start them out sitting, because they have a difficult time telling if they need to urinate or have a bowel movement or both. Their aim is also not great! Some boys enjoy using cheerios as a target when they start standing up. Again, involve your child in the choice.

The school is pressuring me to toilet train my child. I am afraid he will have an accident at school. Preschool and daycare centers often have rules about toilet training. You can't rush your child's process to meet their deadlines. Keep in mind, though, that the school setting may actually help you. When children see their peers using the toilet, it motivates them to do the same. Yes, peer pressure starts early! Also, schools are accustomed to dealing with accidents. If your child is recently trained, send in a change of clothes and let the teacher know. They generally manage this situation with lots of kindness and understanding.

Why does my child always need to use the toilet minutes after we leave the house? I always ask him if he needs to go before we leave the house.

That is because his definition of "I need to go to the bathroom" is "I am about to burst" while yours is "I can squeeze out a few drops." You can see why there is a miscommunication. Teach him to try to empty himself when it is convenient, so he doesn't get uncomfortably full when it is not so convenient.

What if my child resists having a bowel movement in the toilet? Here is one exception to the diaper/pull up rule. Tell her that she can request a diaper for a BM anytime she wants. If you notice her squatting to have a BM, mention that the diaper is available. A sticker reward chart works well here. When you ask for a diaper to have your BM, you get a sticker. Once she is doing that consistently, tell her now to earn her sticker, she needs to go in the bathroom in her diaper to earn a sticker. Next, she can sit on the toilet while wearing the diaper for a sticker. It is usually not too hard to get them to take off the diaper after breaking it down into smaller steps. The reason for this behavior is often fear of the BM exiting the child's body and going directly into the toilet. It is like thinking you can go down the bathtub drain — doesn't make sense to adults. It is the "logic" of the toddler. Don't try to figure it out, just go with it! You don't want to create a battle here, as it can set up a pattern of withholding stool that leads to constipation and a vicious cycle in which the child becomes fearful that the stool will be painful.

When should I expect my child to be dry at night? Most children achieve nighttime dryness within a year or two of daytime control. We don't consider it a problem until the child is 6 or older. When she is dry half the time at night, try underwear. At bedtime, remind her she has on underwear and needs to use the toilet. A sticker reward chart often helps to keep it in mind. If she has lots of accidents, go back to pullups and try again in a month or two. You can't really train them when they are asleep!

My friend uses Skittles or M&Ms to reward her child for using the toilet. Do you recommend this? No. This means the parent is way too involved in the process. Once the novelty wears off and the child figures out how much you want this to work, he will be resistant. Just the nature of the toddler! Also, who is trained here? The child thinks, "I can squeeze out three drops of pee and get candy!"